

Introduction to Fasting



Isaiah 58:6-14 (ESV)

⁶ *“Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?*

⁷ *Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?*

⁸ *Then shall your light break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up speedily; your righteousness shall go before you; the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard.*

⁹ *Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer; you shall cry, and he will say, ‘Here I am.’ If you take away the yoke from your midst, the pointing of the finger, and speaking wickedness,*

¹⁰ *if you pour yourself out for the hungry and satisfy the desire of the afflicted, then shall your light rise in the darkness and your gloom be as the noonday.*

¹¹ *And the LORD will guide you continually and satisfy your desire in scorched places and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters do not fail.*

¹² *And your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to dwell in.*

¹³ *“If you turn back your foot from the Sabbath, from doing your pleasure on my holy day, and call the Sabbath a delight and the holy day of the LORD honorable; if you honor it, not going your own ways, or seeking your own pleasure, or talking idly;*

¹⁴ *then you shall take delight in the LORD, and I will make you ride on the heights of the earth; I will feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.”*

What is Fasting?

Fasting is a time of abstinence from food (all or certain) and sometimes liquids in order to draw near to God in prayer.

It is a way of strengthening your soul by disciplining your flesh. During times of fasting, the believer's focus will be upon prayer in order to encounter God in a greater way and to bring before Him our petitions. As the body becomes disciplined and the mind focused, the believer is able to enjoy and hear God with greater clarity.

What Fasting is Not:

- A diet or way to lose weight.
- A way to earn the love or favor of God.
- A public performance. Fasting is a personal commitment between you and God. You are doing it to please God, not impress someone else. There may be times when you have to tell others you are fasting. (Your co-workers may get the wrong impression if you don't explain to them why you are not going to eat with them.)
- A time of punishing or harming the body.

Is Fasting Commanded in Scripture?

Donald Whitney writes that there are seventy-seven references to fasting in the Bible. However, because fasting is not commanded in the New Testament, and because it is a private, personal discipline, it often goes unnoticed and untaught in many churches.

Fasting is commanded under the Old Testament covenant. God commanded the Israelites in the Old Testament to fast once per year, on the Day of Atonement, to identify with the High Priest who was making sacrifice for their sin.

²⁹ "This is to be a lasting ordinance for you: On the tenth day of the seventh month you must deny yourselves ^b and not do any work—whether native-born or a foreigner residing among you—³⁰ because on this day atonement will be made for you, to cleanse you. Then, before the Lord, you will be clean from all your sins. ³¹ It is a day of sabbath rest, and you must deny yourselves; it is a lasting ordinance."² Leviticus 16:29-31

Fasting is not commanded in the New Testament, but it is available and assumed.

*16 "And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward.
17 But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face,
18 that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you. 3 Matthew 6:16-18*

Jesus, when questioned why His disciples don't fast, replied that there is a time they will fast. Matthew 9:15. (Until Jesus returns as the Bridegroom for His church, Christians may/will practice times of fasting.)

What are some Biblical Examples of Fasting?

Some Old Testament Examples of Fasting:

- ◆ Moses fasted 40 days on behalf of Israel's sin: Deuteronomy 9:9, 18, 25-29; 10:10.
- ◆ David fasted following the deaths of:
Saul: 2 Samuel 1:12.
Abner: 2 Samuel 3:35.
His child: 2 Samuel 12:16.
- ◆ Elijah fasted for 40 days after he fled from Jezebel: 1 Kings 19:7-18.
- ◆ Darius fasted on behalf of Daniel: Daniel 6:18-24.
- ◆ Daniel fasted on behalf of the sin of Judah when reading the prophecy of Jeremiah: Daniel 9:1-19 and following a vision from God: Daniel 10:3-13.
- ◆ Ezra fasted and wept for the sins of the returning exiles: Ezra 10:6.
- ◆ Nehemiah fasted concerning the broken walls of Jerusalem: Nehemiah 1:4
- ◆ Esther told the people to fast on behalf of her when facing the task of helping her people: Esther 4:13-16.
- ◆ The Ninevites fasted after they heard the preaching of Jonah (Ch. 3).

Some New Testament Examples of Fasting in the Bible:

- ◆ The prophetess Anna fasted night and day for the redemption that would come to Jerusalem: Luke 2:37.
- ◆ After his baptism, Jesus fasted for 40 days before He was tempted and began His ministry: Matthew 4:1-11.
- ◆ John the Baptist's disciples fasted: Matthew 9:14-15.
- ◆ Before commissioning Paul and Barnabas, the elders in Antioch fasted: Acts 13:1-5.
- ◆ Paul fasted for three days after he encountered Jesus on the Damascus Road, Acts 9:9.
- ◆ Before elders were appointed in local churches: Acts 14:23

Fasting With a Purpose

We should always hunger with a clear purpose. When our body begins to cry out for food and we are reminded that we are abstaining from food, we should remind ourselves, “Oh yeah, I am fasting so that _____.” Being hungry reminds us that we want God to hear our prayers more than we want food. “What are the needs of yourself, your family, your church, and your community that you want God to intervene in a powerful way?”

Why Should I Fast?

Some Biblical Reasons for Fasting:

- ◆ In order to petition God on behalf of self or others. Psalm 35:13

- ◆ To cry out to God when experiencing affliction. Joel 1:14 and 2:12.

- ◆ When facing a great challenge. Esther 4:16

- ◆ When commissioning, appointing, or exploring a call to ministry. Acts 14:23

- ◆ To confess sin. 1 Samuel 7:6

- ◆ To seek deliverance, justice, answered prayer, direction, refreshment and restoration. Isaiah 58:5-12

What are some reasons (causes) that God may be leading you to fast?

What are some different ways of Fasting?

Absolute Fast. An absolute fast is the abstaining from all food or liquids for a short period of time. (DO NOT do this for more than 3 days.) Acts 9:9

Normal or Liquid Fast: Abstaining from all food, but not liquids. Liquid fast can include: juice, water, coffee, soup, and anything you can put in a blender or a juicer.

Daniel Fast: Only vegetables and fruits. (No meats, no sweets and no treats.) Daniel 1.

Daily Fast: Fasting from morning until evening.

Wesley Fast: In his early ministry, Wesley fasted every Wednesday and Friday. He also ate only bread 10 days prior to a conference that was offered every 2-3 months.⁴

Combination Fast: For example, Normal Fast for 1 day followed by 3 days of a Daniel Fast.

Many other examples:

Getting Started

The Do's of Fasting

1. Have a reason for fasting

What is the reason (cause) for which you are fasting? What are you praying God will do? What are you praying God will do in you? Your church? Is there any specific spiritual/life issue you would like to bring before God during this season?

2. Have a plan

Have a clearly defined purpose and have a settled conviction in your purpose and in the Lord's guidance. Declare your intentions to fast to God. Jehoshaphat proclaimed a fast in 2 Chronicles 20:3. A proclamation denotes: (a) a choice, (b) a commitment and (c) a covenant agreement with God. What types of difficulties do you think you may encounter through the fast? What may be the problems you anticipate facing (physical, medical, spiritual)? What will I need to do to prepare/acclimate these things beforehand? Measure your intentions and expectations for fasting with Isaiah 58 and Matthew 6:16-18.

3. Follow the Holy Spirit and your conscience

Fasting is commanded in the OT and allowed in the New Testament. Fasting is not required. Fast how, and for as long, as you feel led. (1 Corinthians 10:31).

4. Expect physical and spiritual resistance

Jesus was tempted by Satan following 40 days of fasting. (Matthew 4) This will not be easy. You will find yourself craving foods you never even thought about eating. In addition, this time may also bring many unsolved sinful or relational attitudes to the surface. You may begin to wonder why you are so irritable, impatient, unforgiving, etc. Many of these attitudes were present before; they were just fed with food instead of God's word. Also, there will be times when it is not a spiritual battle...you are just really, really hungry.

5. Try to fast with someone else

a. Fasting can be done among a community of believers.

²While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." Acts 13:2

b. We can always persevere longer and accomplish more when we are enduring with someone else.

⁹Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their labor: ¹⁰If either of them falls down, one can help the other up. But pity anyone who falls and has no one to help them up. ¹¹Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm. But how can one keep warm alone? ¹²Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken. ⁷ Ecclesiastes 4:9-12

6. Check with your doctor.

Be sure to consult your physician before fasting, especially regarding any medications you may need to take during the period of fasting. Recognize that your body may experience some changes during this period. When in doubt...call your doctor. Finally, be sure to gradually introduce food following the period of fasting.

7. Make the most of your time when you are fasting

Since fasting is a time to hear from God, it is recommended that normal meal times be set aside for prayer, Bible reading, meditating, journaling and other Christian reading.

- a. Journaling—this is the best time to interact with your thoughts, experiences, insights and questions through journaling.
- b. Spend time in prayer—success is not dependent on how far you can get away from food, but rather how close you can get to God.
- c. Keep distractions to a minimum. Fasting prepares the heart and mind to hear from God. Therefore, it is recommended that you refrain from television, secular/talk radio, Facebook and idle conversations. This is not a legalistic issue. However, consider the following: 1.) It is hard to hear the voice of God when we allow the media to drown it out. 2.) You will be amazed at how many Big Mac commercials appear during a fast. Trust us on this; you don't want to know about \$.99 Whoppers during a fast.
- d. Fasting is a good time to have the godly conversations you may have been neglecting for a while. Is there a major decision you need to make? Is there a difficult conversation you have been putting off having? Are you praying with a group of people about a particular ministry or passion? Do you need to reconnect with someone that you have been unable to find time to meet? Use this time to strengthen and re-establish these relationships as well as encourage one another.

Be warned: If you give up television, Facebook and pointless internet surfing you will quickly find that you are not as busy as you have been led to believe.

The “Do Not’s” of Fasting

1. Do not attempt a supernatural fast.

Only Jesus and Moses were able to do it. Do not go more than 2 days without liquids.

2. Do not be legalistic.

Don't think that fasting will “earn” you something or that you are more spiritual than someone else because of the manner in which you are fasting. According to Isaiah 58:1-5, it is possible to fast with the wrong motives.

3. Do not quit the first time things get difficult.

Fasting will not kill you. In fact, it will probably be good to eliminate many of the toxins/poisons from the body. However, as we said before, check with your doctor before fasting.

4. Do not beat yourself up if you stumble during a fast.

There is no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus. If you fail or forget, don't beat yourself up. Just move on.

Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, Romans 8:1

5. Do not think that you are unspiritual because you get hungry.

You are supposed to get hungry and this is supposed to be uncomfortable.

6. Do not worry about people thinking you are weird.

(People have been thinking that about you for some time.) You are doing this for God and not people. It is actually an opportunity to share your struggles, prayer needs, and faith in God. (Daniel 1)

7. Do that which you believe will honor God and your conscience.

²²So whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the one who does not condemn himself by what he approves. ²³But whoever has doubts is condemned if they eat, because their eating is not from faith; and everything that does not come from faith is sin. Romans 14:22-23

³¹So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God. 1 Corinthians 10:31:

Fasting Declaration

The reason(s) (cause) I am fasting is:

Will anyone be fasting with me? _____

Who? _____

I will fast:

Begin date _____ time _____

Ending date _____ time _____

My fast will be a: (Check one)

Daniel Fast:

Only vegetables and fruits. (No meats, no sweets and no treats.)

Normal or Liquid Fast:

A Liquid fast can include juice, water, coffee, or anything you can put in a blender. (Well, maybe not everything you can put in a blender.)

Absolute Fast:

No food or liquids. Do not do for more than 3 days. (Acts 9:9)

Daily Fast:

Sunup to Sundown

Wesley Fast(s):

In his early ministry, Wesley fasted every Wednesday and Friday. He also ate only bread 10 days prior to a conference that was offered every 2-3 months.

Combination Fast:

a. For example: Absolute fast for 1 day followed by 3 days of a normal fast)

b. I will fast by: _____

Appendix #1

The Discipline of Fasting by Donald Whitney

How often do you think fasting is mentioned in the Bible? By my count, there are some seventy-seven biblical references to fasting. Does that surprise you? Despite so many references, fasting is not a frequent subject in pulpits, publications, and Christian conversation.

In part, this may be due to the fact that, while fasting may be done cooperatively with fellow believers (as in Acts 13:2), typically it is private in nature and shouldn't be evident to others (Matt. 6:16–18). So it's possible that Christians around us fast more than we realize or hear mentioned. But could the main reason that fasting is seldom taught be that fasting is seldom practiced?

Should Christians Fast Today?

As a result of the famine of teaching on the subject, there are a number of common misunderstandings among believers about the discipline of fasting. One is the idea that it is a practice relegated only to biblical times or to religious eccentrics. But Jesus, when asked why His disciples never fasted, replied, "The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast" (Matt. 9:15). Until the ascended Bridegroom returns for His bride, fasting is a spiritual discipline His disciples will occasionally practice. This was the understanding of Christians in the book of Acts, who are reported fasting in 13:2 and 14:23. And church history reports that since the days of the New Testament, the followers of Jesus have likewise engaged in fasting.

Fasting and the Gospel

Another misconception about fasting occurs when people fail to associate it with the gospel. The most egregious version of this is the belief that fasting can impress God enough that He will open the door of heaven for those who deny themselves in this way. That, of course, implies that the life and death of Jesus are unnecessary ("Why repent and trust in Jesus? Just fast a little and heaven is yours."), which is the greatest possible insult to the Father. Neither fasting nor anything else we could do — no matter how painful, self-sacrificial, or unselfish — can atone for our sins and reconcile us to God. Only Jesus, who offered Himself as a sinless sacrifice to bring others to God, can do that.

But it is also possible for genuine Christians to fast but fail to associate their fast with the gospel. They may fast simply in an effort to get things from God. In the New Testament, however, fasting is related to the spread of the gospel or the fruit of the gospel. Similarly, New Testament believers today should fast in a way connected with the spread of the message of Jesus or fast as those who are the servants of Jesus.

So a Christian might fast, for example, and connect it with prayer for missionary labors, for the Sunday morning sermon, or for his witness to a friend. He might fast with prayer primarily for a personal concern, but rest his confidence that God will answer, not on the basis of his abstention from food, but on the fact that he fasted and prayed in the name of Jesus.